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[Lula Demry]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

TITLE: LULA DEMRY

Date of First Writing March 7, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Mrs. Carrie Godbold

Fictitious Name Lula Demry

Address Marion, S.C.

Place Marion County

Occupation Housework and Nurse

Name of Writer Annie Ruth Davis [?]. 10. S. C. Box, 2.

Project #3613

Annie Ruth Davis

Marion, S.C.

March 7, 1939 LULA DEMRY

(White) MARION SOUTH CAROLINA

Lula Demry was born seventy-eight years ago in the Wahoo section of Marion County. Her father was a prosperous farmer and in her young days, she knew neither work nor poverty. Though she worked hard during her married life, she always had a plenty, but was left a poor widow at the death of her husband twenty years ago. Since then, she has been able to support herself mainly by pick-up jobs of nursing now and then. At the present time, too feeble to earn her living any longer, she is living with her daughter, Maggie Wallace, in the town of Marion. Maggie, also a dependent widow, works at the W.P.A. Sewing Room and manages to provide the necessities of life for a family of six in this way. Feeling the need of helping Maggie in some may, Lula forces herself to attend to the few house-hold duties and prepare the noonday meal for the family on the days that Maggie must be off at work. Lula receives an old age pension from the government, the greater part of which she uses to buy milk and medicine for herself.

On this blusterous, rainy February morning, it was with unusual hesitancy that one ventured up the slight hill to the home of Maggie Wallace, which stands within 2 calling distance of Catfish Swamp. The visit was being made in the hope of securing a life story of Lula Demry, told in her own words, and it was feared that Lula might be too busy with her household duties to devote a full morning of her time to talking with an outsider. But on knocking at the door, one was met by Maggie Wallace herself, who invited her guest into their living room in her own friendly manner. She explained that this was one of her off days from the sewing room, which relieved her mother of all household duties for the day. Then she called to Lula Demry to step to the front of the house that someone wanted to see her.

In a few moments, stooped and holding her hip as if in pain, Lula Demry bobbled into the scantily furnished room, dressed in a faded gray and black bathrobe. She was a tall, thin woman, her skin sallow and badly wrinkled, while her few strands of straight brown hair

were screwed in a tiny knot on the tiptop of her head. But in her dark brown eyes, there gleamed an expression of intense interest in life.

“Good morning, child. Well, I never would've known you on this earth, you've changed up so much of a late. Why, I ain't getting along none the best these days. I've this here high blood, trouble with my kidneys, and the old malaria fever - have just about gone to pieces all over. Can't hear, see, nor smell nothing. Oh, Lord, I'm in a awful fix. Can't go to see my neighbors and I want to go so bad.

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“I've had the toughest time lately I've ever had in my life. I ain't been able to work none in two years and I feel like I'm more of a burden than a help laying off on my daughter, Maggie, here. Cose if it wasn't for me, I don't know what she'd do 'cause she's obliged to try to keep on that job to the sewing room to run the family. There's six head of us here to be took care of and ain't a one bringing in nothing but Maggie. Yes, that sewing room pay check's every Lord's thing Maggie has to go on, but what few dollars her brother-in-law hands her now and then. Don't see how she manages good as she does, but she squeeses along and does on the bare necessities - works regular sick or well. You see, she has to buy wood, coal, rations, garments, and pay for lights, water and taxes. Then she's paying so much a month to buy this house and lot, too. Yes, all them things have to come out of her little dab of money.

“Maggie's next to the foreman at the sewing room, but she don't get much at that. Think her pay check touches somewhere in the neighborhood of forty dollars a month. She looks after the patterns, machines, and keeps account of everything that's used. She's so tired at night, she can't hardly go from racing up and down them steps to the sewing room all day long. But Maggie gets along mighty well with them women to the sewing room. Cose she has a little trouble with a few sometimes, but don't none of them stay out of humor long to a time - 'fraid she'll report them.

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“I think Maggie's done mighty well with all she's got on her. Sissy and Johnny, Maggie's two babies, they's still going to school and there's a time here to try to keep them appearing like other children. Maggie's all the time tearing up and making Sissy a new dress out of old clothes people hand down to the child. And Johnny, he picks up little jobs on Saturdays and Sundays at a garage to get enough to buy him some clothes.

“C.R. and his wife live here, too, but they ain't costing Maggie nothing. That's Maggie's oldest living boy and he makes a good living on painting jobs. They've got one child and they do their own housekeeping to theyself in that back room on the other side of the house.

“Then Happy, Maggie's next boy, he went off and got married Christmas day and they come right here to live. We was sho' put out 'bout it, too, for Happy's just nineteen and ain't healthy neither. We've got them nearly everyone on us here and there's not but five rooms in all this old hollow house. We ain't got but one bedroom for the four of us 'cause we had to give Johnny's room to Happy and his wife. This here, it's the company room and we cook and eat in the kitchen. Under the house is all packed up with things we had to move out, so C.R. and his wife could have room to put their belongin's. Maggie was talking the other day that she would have to buy a day bed somehow, if some of them don't soon move out. But they ain't go move out long as Maggie don't charge them no rent - says she couldn't do her children that way.

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I'll tell you, if I had a little more pension, I'd get me some rooms and go to myself.

“But I ain't none but started to tell you the worryation Happy's brought on us. Why, he ain't not only gone and got hitched up to a wife, but he's not got a piece of job neither. He was made manager of Rogers' grocery store in another town and just 'cause he got insulted with the company, he quit and come home. Wasn't nothing dishonest 'bout what he done, but just bought too much groceries to have on hand one time. Well, the head man put

him down to second place and he's the kind that's so carefree and rattlebrain, he quit. So he ain't had nothing to do but pick-up jobs since fall. The manager of Rogers' store here in Marion wants to try and get him back on the job, but Happy ain't stuck on working for Rogers no more. Says you have to be on your p's and q's too much - don't never keep a clerk long.

“Yes, Maggie, she has enough to break her heart with all the trouble her children give her. There's her daughter, Emma, she's afflicted - can't hear nor talk plain neither. Yes, she come into the world that way. Emma was here the other day and she just cried 'cause she can't learn her little boy his lessons. She tries to learn him, but she don't call the words plain and the child's little and don't know no better, he learn learns/ them just like he hears Emma talk. The teacher, not knowing the fix his mamma's in, didn't understand him and thought he couldn't learn. But somebody told the teacher what ailed him and she holds more patience 6 with him now. The child's proud to learn his lessons right, too, I'll tell you. Cose his father tries to help him some, but he runs a filling station and that's a working job. He's a poor boy, but God knows he's good to Emma.

“This here house and lot ain't nothing but a eating sore in Maggie's pocket all the time. You see, it belongs to the government in a way 'cause that's how she got the money to buy it - borrowed it from the government. She bought the house and lot both for something like two thousand dollars, but she's paying for it little by little. Just one payment cost her $18.50 and that comes every month, but she ain't never missed no time yet. Cose it ain't no big place - just this house along with a garden spot and a chicken yard on the back. Still, it's better than renting and not having nothing to show for it in the end.

“Yes, my Lord, we've sho' been up against many a rough day in the last few years. Honey, I'm just all wore out. My will's good, but my strength ain't half. I worked hard many a day before I got sick down. Now, I ain't got no income 'cept that nine dollars pension money the government sends me every month. Cose that's a help to buy what milk and medicine I

need. But hold on there, the government gives me nine dollars and a few cents over, but I never know - Maggie uses all the little extra over nine dollars.

“I get them little things called commodities from the government, too, once a month, but there ain't nothing 7 enticing 'bout them. They need me dried things, such as, beans, fruit, milk, and raisins. And they give me some flour, but no tea, coffee, nor sugar, and we have to buy lard, salt, and baking powder to go in the flour. Oh, yes, they give me some butter once or twice and they send this dry milk right regular. They send me three sacks of milk a month and there's always two messes to a sack. But talk about this dry milk, I'm right for it. It makes the nicest kind of muffins and biscuit - just sift it in right along with the flour and mix up the bread with cold water. Cose I have to buy cow's milk for myself to drink every day, 'cause my blood goes so high, I just stagger. And it's medicine, medicine, medicine, all the time.

“But I want to tell you, I've seen a better day, my child. I was born and raised down on the island in Wahoo Neck Township and I didn't know what work nor worry was in my young days. My father owned three hundred acres of fertile farming land along with plenty of fine timber and we made everything we wanted on that land. Yes, my Lord, we made everything we had to eat in those days but sugar and white flour. Cose we raised our own wheat and had plenty graham flour - even raised our own rice then. Oh, we had everything you could wish for in my young days. Pa didn't think nothing of killing thirty hogs a year to use on the farm and we had every kind of poultry 'tis in this country from pigeons down to turkeys and geese. That was a unselfish time, I'll tell you. Pa never sold nobody nothing in his life, but he'd give it to you. Said the Lord 8 give it to him and he'd give it to somebody else.

“Yes, my faith, in my childhood days, we'd eat meat and now it's bread. No, we don't pretend to have meat but once a day now. People these days say don't eat much meat, but pa taught us to eat more meat than bread. When we used to cook vegetables, we didn't think they was fit to eat unless the grease was laying on the top of them thick as that

first joint of my finger. And we wasn't none the worse off for it neither. I remember, it wasn't no rarity to cook a whole ham and a shoulder to one pot in them days and have sausage to last all summer. Cose a heap of our lard went in the making of the soap 'cause it had the sausage taste sometimes. But Lord have mercy, meat sold for five cents a pound in those days. If them old people could come home now and see how people's living, they wouldn't know where to start. Didn't live out of paper bags in olden times; lived out of barns, smokehouses, and had plenty of cows and chickens. If folks lived that way now, they'd be better off,- but no, they,ve got to live out of paper bags.

“Still, I've not known what it is to have to buy meat many years. I had as much meat accordingly in my married life as before. I raised hogs here and had a milk cow, too, up till two years ago. But I got to where I couldn't tote slops a quarter of a mile down to Catfish Swamp and the town don't allow no hogs and cows kept closer than that to town nowadays. Then I got to the place I wasn't able to tend my cow neither and don't want no cow I ain't able to tend. Ain't never 9 milked a poor cow in all my life. Another thing, we always had a plenty of chickens, but I can't raise many of them here. I've got a few shut up out there, but no more'n nineteen and three of them's roosters. We just ain't able to feed so many. We have to pay fifty cents for a bushel bag of feed every month to feed them few chickens on and don't get but four to six eggs a day. We had to cut their wings to keep them off that man's crop over there and that's against their laying. Ain't nobody's chickens shut up but ours for there's a man in all these other houses 'bout here. Lord knows, people take advantage of poor women every chance they get.

“Like I was speaking to you awhile ago, people eat more bread these days then meat - eat little old sandwiches and such as that mostly. We use a right smart of light bread here to the house 'cause we buy our bread right cheap to the bakery shop. Get the bread that's a little too brown on the top to sell good in the stores and they let people that ain't particular have it for little or nothing. Then a cousin of Happy's wife works for the bakery in Florence and when he comes through here on his way to Myrtle Beach, he brings us the finest kind of doughnuts. Cose they's some that's stayed in the stores to long to sell, but they ain't

hurt and we's sho' glad to get them. Me and Maggie always get along with a little bread and coffee for breakfast, but we try to give the children a egg apiece of a morning to keep their minds sharp.

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“Maggie wants to try and keep the children in shape so they'll keep up in their school work. If Maggie hadn't gone through public school, she couldn't be next to the foreman of the sewing room now. And I'll tell you, I'm proud I've got some education but going to school in my young days was another thing from what it is now. We didn't have but two and three months of public school running, but pa always hired a extra teacher to teach we children the year over. I used to have to walk four miles to school through the woods by myself, but Pa's two big dogs went along with me and I toted a pistol, too. You see, I was 'fraid of stray people and wild animals, but I never did have no attack. I come mighty near it one time though. Ma and me was coming home from visiting in the buggy one evening 'bout sundown and we got the scare of our lives. We looked up and a Nigger was making right for us. Well, I put the whip to the horse and we come home, I'll tell you. That same Nigger 'tacked a man on horseback that night. He'd been seen lying out in the woods by a good many people and some thought he was a run-away convict.

“No, I've not got a foot of land to plant nowhere. Mrs. Miles, she give me 'bout a acre of land back there next Catfish to plant up till I got so I couldn't tend it two years ago. It wasn't much good and was lying out idle, so she told me to use it if I could. I just planted a little beans, peas, and mutton corn out there - never did have no corn to gather more'n a bushel to feed my chickens on. Yes, every lick of 11 work that was put on that garden come by my two hands. Why, I've cut many a hundred sticks from Catfish Swamp and toted them a quarter of a mile on my back to stick beans, but I'm not able to do that nowadays.

“I got married when I was twenty years old and I've been working hard ever since. My husband was a farmer, but didn't own his own farm and had to work hard to make expenses. He always rented the farm we lived on and paid the rent in so much cotton.

No, child, I never did have no curiosity 'bout none of my husband's business - don't know how much rent was costing him. But cotton wasn't bringing but four and five cents a pound at that time and it took near'bout half the crop to pay the rent. My husband didn't want me to work in the field, but I was restless to help him and then I was lonesome out in the country. I didn't have but two children and I kept a nurse, so I went in the field to keep the hoe hands busy to start with. Then I got to picking cotton and hoeing right along with the Niggers. I was might mighty/ slow, but one old Nigger man was so fast, he'd hoe his row out and turn back and hoe mine out in time to keep it going with the others.

“Cose we had a plenty all our married life, but I worked hard many a day to make a little extra. I helped on the farm in the daytime and scoured my house at night. We didn't have but two rooms and we'd cook and eat in one room, while we all slept and sat in the other. That sleeping room, I scoured it regular to keep it clean looking for company.

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“When my husband was fifty-eight years old, he decided to give up farming and took up carpenter's work. He had that work by the job and I couldn't hardly tell what he made on it, but it was a good living. But I wasn't satisfied not to be bringing in nothing, so I got the job over at the lumber mill camps to Laughlin to keep the kitchen for the mill hands. I'd get up way before day and fix rations for all them people. Would fix breakfast and dinner in buckets for the Niggers and had 'bout eight white men to feed in the dining room. I'd fix down a trough and let the Niggers hunt their own buckets on the outside. They'd eat by daylight and by sunrise, they'd all be gone. I'll tell you, I fed them, too, while I was running that kitchen - all said they never fed no better. Why, I give them meat every meal. Oh, the boss man of the mill, he told me what to feed the Niggers on. Give them beans - what we call 44's - these old big limas, potatoes, rice, light bread, and bacon. Cose the white men, I had chicken, pork, beef, and such as that for them. I furnished all the groceries and kept a strict account of every bucket I fixed and every meal I served a white man. Then at the end of every two weeks, the boss man looked over my list and paid me up. Yes, that's where I made my money - cleared from eighty to ninety dollars a month. But I didn't stay there two

years out for my husband got sick and it was so cold to get up so early in the morning, I give it up.

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“My husband had a ruptured appendix of the worse kind. He was operated on one March and the next February, he died out right suddenly. When my husband got sick, we had three hundred dollars ready money and it took it every cent to pay his hospital expenses and to bury him. It all come on me so quick, I was in so much trouble, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't live with my son, John, 'cause his family was getting bigger every year that come. So I divided out my furniture with my children and went to live with Maggie. At that time, Maggie had three younguns that was almost babies and I found myself more of a help than a hindrance to her.

“As long as Jim, Maggie's husband lived, he provided mighty good for us. Yes, he didn't care so much 'bout dressing, but we always had a plenty to eat. I'll tell you, I made my support while Jim was living. I made all the gardens on the place and picked peas up till the year Jim died - paid me a dollar a hundred pounds for picking peas. But Jim died twelve years ago and since then, we've sho' seen many a hard day.

“Maggie was left a poor widow at Jim's death with six children to make a living for. Her oldest son, Joe, had just finished college the year his father died and he was sho' a blessing to Maggie on this earth. If it hadn't been for him, I don't know how she would've pulled through. Joe was one smart boy and his mind was sort of unusual - all the professors told Maggie so. He was a school teacher, but poor boy, his education didn't do him good long enough to pay for getting it. He hadn't been out of college three years before he took 14 down with pneumonia and died. Maggie, poor soul, she was one broke up woman. She didn't know how she would got along, but she got a little sewing to do now and then and somebody was all the time sending her something to help out. Then after a time, she got that job to the sewing room and it's been her salvation, I'll tell you.

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“My principal work since Jim died has been the tending of babies - learned how to do that kind of nursing from my aunt. Yes, my Lord, I always had a doctor with me on every case I tended - wasn't no midwife. Just helped in the way of giving chloroform and helping the doctor around the bed. I always spent nine days to a case and got ten dollars regular price - didn't do none of the washing neither but the baby washing. Why, I got a case every month that come and often-times two a month. Reckon I've tended a hundred cases over Catfish and in other parts of the county, but many and many a one, I ain't never got a cent for. You know in all my helping of babies, I never had a baby or a mother to die. Nor I never had one of them to catch cold 'cause I was particular with them. I sho' enjoyed my work, too, but when my eyes and my body failed me, I couldn't help myself. Ain't had nothing to bring me in a cent in the last four years.

“I belong to Shiloh Methodist Church cross Catfish yonder, but Maggie and the children belong to the Methodist Church up there on Godbold Street. The children go regular, but Maggie don't never go - says when she's got one thing, she ain't got the other. Yes, I've belonged to Shiloh all my life, but they've 15 got my church locked up now. Yes, it's all this talk of “Unification” that's causing the noise of it. The preacher over there is hot for Unification and the congregation, they's hot against it. The people got so mad with the preacher, they locked him out the church one Sunday and he stood up on the steps of the church and preached to one or two anyhow. Then the preacher took the Shiloh membership and moved it thirteen miles to the Mullins Methodist Church. Now, how's the people go get to Mullins? The most of them ain't got no oxcart to go in, much less a automobile. But if Shiloh people ain't got no preacher now, they's still holding prayer meetings and club meetings over there. No, the Shiloh people ain't go be outdone by nobody. Let them have a picnic over there and I bet there ain't no people in South Carolina have more to eat than Shiloh. I know I own six-foot of land to Shiloh to bury me on and if the Unification people take that piece of dirt away from me, they'll get it over my dead body. No, that's my property and ain't nobody got no claim on it but Lula Demry.”